



The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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No. 177

MARCH 17TH, 1943

DEAR MEMBER,

Letters from our members commenting on the memorandum sent in by the Bishop of Durham and published in C.N.L. No. 171, in which the views of a teacher on religious education were set forth, confirm the opinion that the memorandum struck near to the heart of the problem.

THE ADOLESCENT AND RELIGION

The memorandum dealt with religious education within the school. It may help us to an understanding of the whole question of Christian education in modern society if we leave the school for the time being and approach the matter from the angle of boys' and girls' clubs and of the adolescent in general. In schools, procedure is largely canalized. There are school prayers, an allotted time for scripture teaching with, in an increasing number of schools, an agreed syllabus laying down the content of that scripture lesson. In clubs the problem has to be taken in hand from the bottom up. The club leader is given his human material : he has to take his fourteen-year-olds as they are and make a beginning. When he looks at his boys and girls to see whether or no the school has given him a foundation on which to build, he is compelled to ask what is the one vital question about school religious teaching : "How lasting are the effects, and if they do not last, what is the reason ? "

One who is at present working in a large boys' club in London told me a few days ago that he had been much concerned by the seemingly complete ignorance of the basic facts of the Christian religion displayed by the vast majority of his boys. He visited the headmaster of a local elementary school from which many of these boys came, and found him not, as he had expected, apathetic about religious instruction, but really keen. No teacher in this school was compelled to teach scripture, but none had refused : yet to the boys it was a school subject only, of no practical relevance, and left behind like a sloughed skin when they left school.

I was once present at a conference of headmasters of public schools on the subject of religious education. It was agreed that religious conditions in the schools themselves were in the main satisfactory ; a large proportion of boys were genuinely interested in the scripture teaching and valued the Chapel services—religion met with a real response. There was similar agreement that in the majority the effects seemed to wear off altogether after they left school. This illustration from the public schools is important, because religious education is given under far more favourable conditions than we can expect to attain through the national system as a whole.

Had the club organizer whose experience I have quoted been discussing English history instead of Bible knowledge with his boys, he would almost certainly have found that the facts they remembered were of the burnt-cakes order of importance. It is exceedingly difficult to remember facts which are not relevant to experience. At fourteen years old,

nearly nine out of ten of our nation's children leave school, where life has on the whole been based on consideration for others, honesty and truthfulness and fair play, and plunge into a world which regards these values as superfluous if they stand in the way of getting on. The more the school has been to a boy or girl a real community, the greater is the plunge into the working world. If worship and religious knowledge have never been brought into a child's life by anything but the school, it is only to be expected that they will be forgotten as irrelevant or even despised as unreal when he finds himself in a world which reverses most of the values which he has been taught to admire. The value of the scripture lesson is that it supplements the teaching of home and church, and sets religious knowledge in the context of knowledge as a whole. When we look to it to convey the whole of religious experience we are asking for the impossible.

The following letter from one who spends his whole time among youth leaders states clearly the problems that have to be faced, though it does not and cannot be expected to provide complete answers :—

" It is very doubtful whether it is a sound policy in the religious education of adolescents to introduce ' religion ' directly. As a Christian educationist I feel that the religion we want them to have is one that is closely integrated with their experience and which comes as an answer to an awakened need, and many youth leaders with whom I have talked have come to the same conclusion. They know that prayers at the end of an evening or talks about religion do not seem to be relevant and certainly do not, in the main, get over. Many youth leaders co-operate readily in developing a good standard of values, a sense of purpose, and a common loyalty to the community. This can be done about so simple a matter as drawing up the rules of conduct in the club, defining the aim of it, finding jobs for its members to do. In all these matters the leader's own Christian experience is a vital factor. I have found that discussions in youth clubs begun anywhere on the circumference of life seem to drift towards religion.

" I have found youth centres run by the Local Education Authority in which the local minister by accepting people where he found them has slowly gained the right to interpret their life in the terms of Jesus Christ. We must see the strategy needed for winning this essentially religious generation for Christ and setting our best men, both ministerial and lay, in the place where these young people are, even if that is, for the moment, outside the Church.

" The youth leaders' conference held at Langdale a few months ago, at the invitation of the Director of Education, is another illustration. There we gathered to talk about planning a new democracy. One session was given to the discussion of the place of religion in society and a short service was held, but the conference found it could not get away from the religious aspect of its problems. A standard of values, a sense of purpose, a feeling for the community and a readiness to give to it—these were demands which kept rising up. The conference came to an end with a strong sense of the need for personal committal. Here were a representative company of serious-minded people, with a genuine social passion for the welfare of this bewildered generation. They know that ultimately there is only a religious answer to its need, but they do not know where to find it. They are largely prevented from finding it in the Church because they do not see members of the churches making a disinterested approach to this problem, and think that the Church is chiefly concerned with the Church.

" The direction which our Christian youth work must take is indicated by what has been said. We have been too easily satisfied with religion for its own sake as a thing apart. We have felt that we achieved something important when we have formed a study circle of young people to talk about religion. The ways of service we have suggested to them have been too much limited to personal ambulance work and the domestic needs of the Church. But anything which removes the attention of young people from daily work and life as the main sphere of Christian faith and witness does them a double disservice. It develops a religion of unreal character and it encourages in the minds of young people outside the Church a distressing sense of the irrelevance of Church religion. We need a Christian youth organization which is at once inter-denominational and realistic, and which sees the field of Christian activity to-day in politics, industrial organization, municipal administration, social services, the education of the children and the leadership of youth."

YOUTH LEADERSHIP

The News-Letter is occasionally accused of taking too gloomy a view of things. There seems to me no ground for pessimism in the picture given in this letter. There is life and challenge in it. Its central contention—that young people are in search of a religious faith—has been borne out by a series of B.B.C. discussions on education called "Living and Learning," in the course of which a headmaster and a headmistress have each confirmed from their own experience a new search for a faith among young people. But we should be anything but complacently cheerful. It is widely mistaken to assume that because young people are seeking a faith to live by that they must inevitably arrive sooner or later as full members of one of the existing Christian churches. The emergence of a dominating social purpose which assumed the form of a cause would undoubtedly draw thousands of young people to it if it demanded enough of them. If there is life in the Christian forces of this country they are already shaping that social purpose from within.

The other thing which this letter makes clear is that we must begin the religious education of the adolescent by taking him as he is. One of the most marked characteristics of the fourteen-sixteen year age is the inborn desire for leadership. Where there is no father, Scout master, club leader or older friend whose word "goes," a rugger international, a film star or a fighter pilot, or the conduct or achievement which they represent, take their place. It is tragic to watch the apeing by boys and girls of the mannerisms, ways of speech and dress of film stars—tragic not because film stars are bad, but because they are unreal—a mixture of their unknown selves and the parts they act, with whom there is no *rappor*, no relationship, no meeting.

It is doubtful whether we know where to look for leadership for youth, and how to evoke leadership which lies dormant from want of a cause to serve. The manager of a factory told me recently that several of his men who were called up for military service had returned on leave and come to see him. "Some of them are officers now. I have been staggered to see young fellows whom I never thought of for posts of even minor responsibility in the works coming back smart, keen, able to speak up for themselves and looking me straight in eye. You may be sure I've made a note of them for future reference, but I admit it as a failure in management not to have spotted their potentialities myself."

The report of the Director of Education for Aberdeen on the Youth Service Scheme in that city¹ describes a scheme which for thoroughness of conception probably has few equals. The Local Education Authority organizes continuation classes on three evenings of the week, clubs with an immense range of activities on two nights, and a dance (for entrance to which attendance at one class and one service activity are essential) on Saturday. Leaders are selected, thoroughly trained and paid. What is chiefly interesting, however, is the direction in which this Education Authority has looked for its leaders.

"Although brilliant and gifted leaders are not too easily found, it is doubtful if there is any real scarcity of fine men and women with a flair for leadership . . . It has been my experience that few leaders can excel the young man who has been for some years in the Boys' Brigade or the Boy Scouts, and who, it may be said, has risen from the ranks. He has reached the top through sheer doggedness and innate merit. He has been subjected to discipline, and is able to maintain it . . .

"Young men of this type are generally drawn from the working class ; they understand working-class social life, having gone through the same home and industrial experiences. There is no semblance of patronage about them, no idea of lifting up the submerged mass, and they possess the urge and inspiration of an ideal . . . The fact that they have a Church connection is of paramount importance. They can 'stay the distance,' and the wider service to which they are to devote themselves affords them a splendid opportunity for the display of those qualities which they have acquired and developed during years of junior training organization."

¹ The Youth Problem : An Aberdeen experiment. Patrick McGee, Aberdeen Press and Journal Office. 6d.

The report does not touch on a factor of great importance—that the best club leader is one who sees his function as that of enabling boys and girls to lead themselves. This enabling of others is inherent in the Christian conception of leadership. It is brought out in this letter, from an experienced woman club leader :—

"One of my club members used to organize monthly dances throughout the winter (pre-war). The head of an evening institute made the school hall available and one of the boys was M.C. There were always about a hundred present, and nobody more responsible had anything to do with it. There was never any rowdiness, although a local club with all the best management was constantly having trouble with drunks, etc., at its Saturday night dances. During the blitz there was considerable trouble on some occasions because club life was springing up in the shelters apart from the club leaders—who wanted to come in and take over and were not always well received by the young people. If the young workers had what the middle classes would consider normal facilities for leisure-time recreation, a great deal of so-called leadership, which is in fact supervision, would be unnecessary. At present the demands of young people for recreation at the end of a working day cannot be met unless they can get access to buildings which are in the control of the churches, the educational authority, the social worker, or are commercially run. There is no place which is theirs by right and not on sufferance of good behaviour or church attendance.

"One result is that the job of leader and supervisor is inextricably confused, and we frequently see the youngsters at their worst. They are aware that they are being watched and are self-conscious. They know that final responsibility rests not with them, but with the management, on whom they are prepared to shoulder it—the manager is there to keep order—let him show he can do it under the worst conditions. Finally, they feel that they are there for the club leader's benefit rather than their own, that their presence is doing him a good turn, and helping him to 'be a success' at his job.

"How can something be salvaged out of this distorted situation? My own conviction is that we ought to look far more carefully at the danger we are in of exploiting a bad situation in the name of Christianity. I can only see youth leadership taken up by Christians as an act of atonement for the neglect of its youth by society. I believe that the first necessity is to disclaim all privilege—of position, education, social standing or spending power—and prove oneself to be at the service of youth—available to meet their needs. I found that I only began to win their confidence when I had convinced them that I was not there to put something over on them. I could, however, help them to break out of the closed circle imposed by financial, social and educational restrictions and find the stimuli to growth—new people, new places, new ideas—which many of us take for granted. I could also help them to set a right value on their own gifts of character and ability, and to increase their sense of personal worth and dignity. Practically, this meant handing over every possible responsibility to them, drawing on their trade skills, helping them to get further training and practice when they showed ability and being prepared to be a learner under or alongside them. I taught them keep-fit, they taught me dressmaking. We went together for a home nursing course. At camp all the work was shared. But none of this can be done in a hurry, and with the present speed-up of youth work it is not always remembered that mutual confidence is of slow growth."

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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Indices have been issued every six months since October, 1939, price 1s. each post free.
Folders—Black rexine, to hold 26 Letters and Supplements. 3s. Post free.

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THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-Letter, 19 DEAN'S YARD, WESTMINSTER, LONDON, S.W. 1.